

CHIT CHAT CLUB
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F. Roy Willis
“De Gaulle and FDR”

Here is the Constable of France.” (Churchill on de Gaulle.)

The wartime relations of Charles de Gaulle and Franklin Delano Roosevelt are a long story of misunderstanding and personal animosity. Both men loved France and believed that they were serving her best interests. Yet they were separated by a wide gulf in their ideal of the future France. Since neither Roosevelt nor his Secretary of State Cordell Hull ever admitted this to himself, they were able to assume that their troubles with de Gaulle were due to his personal idiosyncrasies. They failed to understand that de Gaulle’s ambitions more closely matched those of the French people than theirs did.

In the fall of 1940, official Washington found itself in a most perplexing situation. There were now two French governments, de Gaulle’s self-appointed French National Committee (Comité National Français) controlling French Central Africa and the French islands in the Caribbean and the South Pacific, and Marshal Henri Pétain’s Vichy government, controlling, with Germany’s blessing, one-third of France, the French North and West African colonies, and the remainder of the French army and navy. Hull and the President both believed that the United States would gain great advantage by maintaining diplomatic relationships with Vichy, stiffening Pétain’s backbone in resisting Hitler’s demands and maintaining a listening-post in the heart of Nazi-controlled Europe.

For these reasons, Roosevelt sent his old friend Admiral William Leahy, then governor of Puerto Rico, as Ambassador to Vichy. De Gaulle was outraged. ”For the State Department,” he wrote to his emissary René Pleven in Washington, “the whole French question consists in ensuring that Vichy does not collaborate actively with Germany. Cordell Hull believes he can bring this about by appeasing Vichy at any price. Pleven, replied with some bitterness: “It is astonishing to see how little the Free France movement is known to the American public and what is known of it is, very often, in its disfavor. Powerful propaganda has undoubtedly been carried on by Vichy to throw a false light on the movement and on the intentions of its head.... The movement is no better known to the French element in the United States.” Pleven was however, able to win some support from leading members of the cabinet, including the Secretary of War Henry Stimson, and in November, the benefits of the lend-lease program were extended to the French National Committee. Meanwhile the American public had become aware of the existence of Free France and of its leader, who was maintaining his stand in spite of being under sentence of death in his own country for treason. Both *Time* and *Life* magazines published articles on de Gaulle that summer, leading Leahy to remark later in his memoirs: “Although his political philosophy appeared to be little different from that of the government of Pétain, when I arrived back in the United States in May [1942], de Gaulle was the hero of the so-called Liberals....”

So far, the personalities of the leaders had entered little into the negotiations between the Free French and Washington. But with de Gaulle's seizure of the St. Pierre and Miquelon islands in December, 1941, there began a long personal clash of de Gaulle with Roosevelt and Hull which had important repercussions on the course of Franco-American relations for the rest of the war.

St. Pierre and Miquelon are two small islands off the coast of Newfoundland in the estuary of the Saint Lawrence river, left under French sovereignty to this day by an anomaly in the Treaty of Paris of 1763, giving them access to the rich Newfoundland cod fisheries in recompense for losing the rest of French Canada to Britain. St. Pierre possessed a powerful transmitting station, capable of giving meteorological reports to German submarines and surface raiders, and negotiations between Britain, Canada, and the Free French were proceeding to prepare for its capture. Washington demurred, however, because it had just concluded a somewhat broad agreement with Admiral Robert, who as the Vichy-appointed Governor of Martinique also was responsible for St. Pierre, that there were to be no changes in the "status quo" in the Western Hemisphere. On December 17, the British Foreign Office cabled that de Gaulle "agreed that the proposed action should not (repeat not) now be undertaken."

On December 24, however, the Free French forces took possession of the islands without incident and amidst acclamation by the local population. A plebiscite held the next day showed 98 percent of the population in favor of the action.

This incident set the tone for the whole relationship of de Gaulle with Roosevelt and Hull. De Gaulle had acted without regard for the position of the American government, using the pretext that actions were being planned by Canada to prevent his interference. His increasingly touchy feelings were to be seen again and again; and while de Gaulle never seemed to reflect on the effect of his actions on the position of his Allies, neither Hull nor Roosevelt ever seemed to appreciate, or think it important, the delicacy needed to deal with the hurt national pride of de Gaulle. (Or perhaps, as is very likely, de Gaulle realized that in his circumstances his only weapon was to exaggerate his outrage, and to hint that at some time in the future, when American troops entered France itself, he might well be needed.)

Throughout the war, most Washington leaders continued to believe that their annoyance with de Gaulle was due to his irritating personality and to his search for personal power. Roosevelt, in fact, saw himself as the champion of the French people against de Gaulle, in that he would endorse no government which had not been chosen by the French people themselves. The great charge against de Gaulle was of egoism. But no one asked, as de Gaulle himself wrote, "whether de Gaulle was egoist for himself or for France." Had Washington done so, it would have realized that the true source of its irritation at de Gaulle was due to the fact that he was claiming for France, through his own political organization, a far more important position than Roosevelt was willing to accord it. Fortunately for France (and de Gaulle), Churchill remained convinced from the fall of France on that "it is in the major interest of Great Britain to have a strong France after the war", and for this reason he accepted the minor discomfort of de Gaulle's attitudes and supported him in his major aim of recreating the power of France.

The St. Pierre incident shows the attitudes in microcosm. Hull, already assailed by opponents of his Vichy policy, made his own position worse by his violent reaction. Stimson remarks that

“to Secretary Hull.... the very mention of de Gaulle was enough to produce an outburst of skillful Tennessee denunciation.” Returning to his office on Christmas Day, Hull expressed his displeasure in a very undiplomatic announcement: “Our preliminary reports show that the action taken by the so-called Free French ships at St. Pierre-Miquelon was an arbitrary action contrary to the agreement of all parties concerned and certainly without the prior knowledge and consent in any sense of the United States Government. This Government has inquired of the Canadian Government as to the steps that government is prepared to take to restore the status quo of these islands.”

The American public, however, which had suffered the shock of Pearl Harbor only eighteen days before, had welcomed this romantic episode as the one bright spot in a gloomy Christmas. Hull was ridiculed in the press as the “so-called Secretary of State”, and Churchill, then in Washington, pleaded de Gaulle’s case so strongly that he and Hull, Churchill later wrote, “indulged in some plain speaking.” Roosevelt refused to make a big issue of this matter, and Hull became so depressed that he even considered resigning. The incident was finally allowed to blow over.

Throughout 1942, as American relations with Vichy worsened, a minimum of cordiality was fostered between the State Department and de Gaulle. The day after Pierre Laval, who favored greater collaboration with the Germans, was appointed prime minister in the Vichy government by President Pétain, Leahy was recalled from Vichy for “consultations”, and did not return to France. But a brief calming of relations with de Gaulle was soon interrupted; for, from the time of the Anglo-American invasion of French North Africa, de Gaulle found his position challenged by a deliberate American effort to replace him as leader of the French forces fighting the Axis powers.

The invasion, named “Operation Torch “, had been planned in accordance with Washington’s view of the Vichy situation. The landings were to be as exclusively American as possible, with the idea that an American invasion would be more acceptable to Vichy than a British or Free French landing. The troops, British as well as American, landed on the Mediterranean and Atlantic coasts of French North Africa on November 8, 1942. On November 13, General Dwight Eisenhower, the Allied Commander, found that Admiral François Darlan, the commander of the French armed forces who was a renowned collaborator with the Germans, was visiting Algiers to see his sick son. Eisenhower decided rather misguidedly that, since Darlan was the senior Vichy official in Algeria, he would strike a bargain with him. Darlan was recognized by Eisenhower as High Commissioner of the French North African Territories, and in return he ordered French forces there to cease fire.

De Gaulle was doubly infuriated, first by the so-called “Darlan deal”, but more by the fact that the whole expedition had been kept secret from him and his forces. He was well aware of the attitude to him in Washington which Leahy later described: “Of course we knew that his organization was impregnated with German spies, and if we had given him advance information the Germans might have known it.” Leahy notes almost gleefully that when de Gaulle received the news of the invasion, “he almost had an apoplectic fit. His Gallic pride had been insulted. He was in a terrible frame of mind.” Leahy added that he opposed a visit by de Gaulle to Washington because of “reports that this pressure [for de Gaulle’s visit] was being instigated by

a group of Jews and Communists in this country who feared Darlan's Fascist attitude" De Gaulle had in fact been aware of the pending invasion, since he had noticed preparations on his trip to Egypt in the early fall, and so had had time to brood. He was especially annoyed by the American explanation that they were refusing to recognize him "on the pretext of leaving the French free to choose their own government one day," while at the same time maintaining relations with a Vichy government minister in supposedly liberated French North Africa.

However, the assassination of Darlan by a disaffected Frenchman on December 24 and the choice of a career French officer, General Henri Giraud, as Darlan's successor, made it possible for de Gaulle to consider a coalition with him.

But in Giraud, who showed no political ambitions for the future, the American government had found a leader it could champion. Giraud was to be the instrument by which de Gaulle could be controlled or even eliminated as a political force.

Churchill pointed out that the British and Americans found themselves in a curious position by each supporting a different émigré government, and he and Roosevelt resolved to settle this matter during their conference in Casablanca in January 1943. Accordingly de Gaulle was summoned from London with the aim of persuading him to become Giraud's second-in-command.

To the amazement of the two matchmakers, who insisted on referring to Giraud as the bridegroom and de Gaulle as the bride, de Gaulle declined the invitation. Worse, as the British Foreign Minister Anthony Eden phrased it, "on receiving the invitation, General de Gaulle expressed no pleasure." At this point, Roosevelt became infuriated, and said to Churchill:

"Who pays for de Gaulle's food?" Churchill shrugged, and said, "Well, the British do." Roosevelt retorted, "Why don't you stop his food and maybe he will come?" De Gaulle did arrive finally on January 22, although it was doubtful if he was driven by pangs of hunger. He was immediately appalled on seeing the arrangements that had been made by the Americans for the conference.

In his words: "A barbed-wire fence encircled the conference. American sentries surveyed the inside and outside of the conference, and no-one was allowed to enter or leave...In short, it was captivity. (In all his speeches, whenever de Gaulle interjected "in short", trouble was coming. In French, "En bref, c'était la captivité.") If the Anglo-Saxons imposed it on themselves, I saw no objection. But the fact that they applied it to me and, what is more, on French sovereign territory, appeared to me a sort of outrage...."

The first meeting of the President and General de Gaulle took place in the main room of the Roosevelt villa in a setting reminiscent of Gilbert and Sullivan. As Henry Hopkins entered, he saw "that the whole secret service detail was behind the curtain and above the gallery in the living room and at all the doors.... None of this hocus pocus had gone on when Giraud saw the President." Hopkins thought de Gaulle was unaware of these figures, but de Gaulle wrote later that "although my companion pretended to be alone in my company, I discerned some shadows in the rear of an upper gallery, and I saw the curtains move in the corners...Because of these

shadowy figures, it was a strange atmosphere in which Roosevelt and I had our first conversation.”

In this and at their second and final meeting in Washington, both men spoke from a deeply thought-out philosophy of history—yet they failed utterly to find any sympathy for each other’s point of view. De Gaulle ascribed Roosevelt’s determination to lead America to a responsible share in world affairs and to prepare future policy on a world scale as prompted by “the greatest ambitions... The United States gave way in her turn to the desire for intervention where her instinct for domination would be concealed. It was this tendency which President Roosevelt displayed par excellence.... Roosevelt intended that the peace be an American peace...that, in particular, France have him for her savior and arbiter.”

Roosevelt, faced with de Gaulle’s vibrant nationalism and his passionate sense of his own mission, was later to make fun of de Gaulle’s conversation. De Gaulle, he said, first compared himself to Clemenceau, and then to Joan of Arc, whereupon Roosevelt told him to make up his mind, because he could not be both. This story, according to Hopkins, was pure fiction, but Roosevelt was still repeating it at the Yalta conference to the sympathetic audience of Stalin and his foreign minister Molotov.

On January 24, after de Gaulle and Giraud had agreed to exercise joint command of the French forces a short theatricality was performed when de Gaulle, Giraud, Churchill, and Roosevelt went to the porch to be photographed together. De Gaulle wrote later: “All went well! America would be satisfied, seeing and believing that the French question found its *deus ex machina* in the person of the President.”

In fact, nothing was finally decided until June 3, 1943, when the French Committee of National Liberation (Comité Français de Libération Nationale) was established in Algiers with de Gaulle and Giraud as joint presidents. This seemed sufficient of a compromise for the committee to be recognized by the American government, in very grudging terms, “as administering those French overseas territories that recognize its authority. This statement does not constitute recognition of a Government of France or of the French Empire by the government of the United States.”

The President was still worried about the nature of the Committee, however, and he voiced his feelings in a telegram to Churchill on June 5:

“...The bride [de Gaulle, as always] evidently forgets that there is still a war in progress over here. We receive only the bride’s publicity. What is the matter with our British-American information services? Best of luck in getting rid of our mutual headache.”

Churchill attempted to reassure Roosevelt, by pointing out that de Gaulle was now restrained by a committee of seven. De Gaulle, however, was slowly gaining ascendancy over the Giraud group, Giraud himself, as Churchill pointed out, being much the weaker personality and in fact little more than an American nominee: “The only support he possessed lay in certain army circles who valued American good will and in his role as co-president of the French Committee.” On November 8, 1943, Giraud resigned from the Committee, leaving de Gaulle as sole president.

By the end of 1943, de Gaulle was thus in undisputed control of a committee which had assumed the form of an embryo French government. Moreover, a French army and navy were being welded together, a tangible gage in the power struggle ahead. On January 23, 1944, it was announced that the French Army would consist of five infantry and three armed divisions, with the necessary service units, in all a striking force of 256,000 men. As General de Lattre de Tassigny, the Army commander, wrote later, "the French Army which was feverishly preparing for the liberation was not therefore a symbolic force, but a solid and powerful reality, forming an appreciable part of the total Allied strength."

De Gaulle's growing prominence was not at all pleasing to Roosevelt or Hull. In the winter of 1943-44, they were preparing American policy toward liberated France and to the French underground resistance, and the Secretary of War, Henry Stimson, in his own words, "was disappointed by the degree of feeling which seemed to enter into the thinking of Mr. Roosevelt and Mr. Hull, both of whom had been sorely tried, over a long period, by the personal peculiarities of the French leader." However, Eisenhower in January told Stimson that "closer dealing with the Committee would be a great contribution to the success of the forthcoming operations." Shortly afterwards, John McCloy, the Assistant Secretary of War, pointed out to Leahy that he felt Eisenhower should turn over to de Gaulle control of the liberated areas of France. Bullitt, the former ambassador to France, also told Leahy that he thought it well to accept de Gaulle, since the United States would have to take over the "task of rehabilitating France to save it from Bolshevism." And, of course, Churchill continued throughout the spring to press for further support of de Gaulle. But Roosevelt could not be persuaded.

His theoretical position was that he would recognize no government of France until the French people had had a chance to express its own choice. According to Hull, he put this idea brutally at a cabinet meeting on May 20 "when he added that he had told John Winant, {the American ambassador to Great Britain}, that if anyone could give him a certificate proving that de Gaulle was a representative of the French people he would deal with him, but that otherwise he had no idea of changing his mind." He did, however, make it known that he would welcome a request from de Gaulle to visit Washington.

De Gaulle had meanwhile further outraged Roosevelt. In December he arrested three leading French officials in Algeria, all of whom were known for their active support of Vichy, but who nevertheless had been pushed forward by Hull. On April 9, 1944, Giraud himself, who as we saw had earlier lost his political position, was ousted from military command; and at this point the President became considerably cooler in his willingness to see de Gaulle.

De Gaulle was finally called to England from Algeria two days before the proposed date for the invasion of Normandy, and he expressed considerable annoyance to Eisenhower and Churchill that he had not been informed earlier. When Churchill suggested that he should go to Washington to get recognition of his newly formed "Provisional Government of the French Republic", de Gaulle asked him, "Why do you seem to think that I have to put before Roosevelt my candidature for the control of power in France? The French Government exists. I have nothing to ask in that sphere from the United States any more than I have from England."

Roosevelt continued to refuse recognition. According to Stimson, Roosevelt “believes that De Gaulle will crumble and that the British supporters of De Gaulle will be confounded.... The President thinks that other parties will spring up as the liberation goes on and that De Gaulle will become a very little figure. He said that he already knew of some such parties...”

In reality, it became clear, as the liberation progressed, that liberated France had accepted de Gaulle unreservedly. He still had to make his pilgrimage to Washington. The visit, which took place on July 6, was a surprising success. Leahy found de Gaulle “more agreeable in manner than I had expected,” and even Hull “found that de Gaulle was now in a much more reasonable frame of mind.” In any case, he received de facto recognition of his Provisional Government by the United States on June 11. On August 2, de Gaulle entered Paris and drove the length of the Champs Elysees amid wildly enthusiastic throngs. But in September Stimson still found that “the President seemed to be further hampered by his obsession with the notion of a coming revolution in France.”

No revolution materialized, however, and the French Forces of the Interior, the former underground resistance or maquis, were incorporated into the French First Army, bringing its strength up to almost 400,000 men. Under Churchill’s pressure, the Provisional Government received de jure recognition in October, and on November 1 it was offered a seat on the European Advisory Commission, until then a three-power body (United States, Russia, and Great Britain) which was planning the surrender and occupation of Germany.

In December it became clear the damage that had been done to American prestige in France by Roosevelt’s continuing distrust of de Gaulle, although this could have been partly explained by distorted news released in France’s censored press. A public opinion poll published in December had asked:

“Do you consider that the present attitude of the United States towards France is satisfactory?”
Result: Yes: 33% No: 53%.

When the same question was asked about Russia, the result was: Satisfactory: 53% Not satisfactory: 17%.

And even now, from de Gaulle’s point of view, the period of France’s humiliations was not yet over. For France, that is to say de Gaulle, was not to be invited to Yalta, the greatest of the wartime conferences of the Allied leaders, mainly because neither Roosevelt nor Stalin wanted him there.

At Yalta, Stalin and Roosevelt quickly came to an agreement in their feelings about de Gaulle. Stalin remarked that he had not found de Gaulle a “complicated person,” and that he thought Roosevelt was over-impressed by France’s share in the fighting in the war, whereupon Roosevelt repeated his now apocryphal story of de Gaulle and Joan of Arc. According to Edward Stettinius, who had replaced Hull as American Secretary of State, “When Marshal Stalin asked the President why he favored a zone [of occupation in Germany] for France, the President replied that he favored it only out of kindness. Both the Marshal and Molotov, in vigorous terms, said that this was the only reason to give the French a zone.”

Again, through the support of Churchill, who told Roosevelt “the French had long experience in occupying Germany, and they would not be lenient”, France was finally given a zone of occupation and a seat on the Control Council for Germany, the Allied body that was to supervise the occupation of Germany.

When the conference was over Roosevelt prepared to meet de Gaulle on his way home, as he thought had been agreed with de Gaulle’s Foreign Minister Georges Bidault. Roosevelt’s trip was, however, assuming all the character of an imperial tourney. He received the rulers of Saudi Arabia, Ethiopia, and Egypt, namely Ibn Saud, Haile Selassie, and King Farouk, none of whom had an unimpeachable democratic reputation. De Gaulle had no intention of flying down to Algeria, the invitation reminding him too closely of the humiliating summons to Casablanca in 1943, coming straight after the failure to invite him to Yalta. He announced that he regretted that the President could not visit Paris, and that the invitation to Algiers “caught him unprepared, at a time when many matters required his presence in Paris and immediately after a conference between three Allied heads of state, their advisers and experts, a conference in which France had not taken part and the results of which it still did not know.”

One last crisis remained. After his trip to Washington de Gaulle had decided that what mattered was the reality of power, “what one takes and what one knows how to hold; that France, to regain its position, must rely only on herself.” Thus, when the Allied plan for the Allied drive into Germany beyond the Rhine in March left the French holding only the rear de Gaulle determined once more to act regardless of his Allies.

On May 29, he telegraphed to General de Lattre: “My dear General, you must cross the Rhine even if the Americans are not agreeable and even if you have to cross it in boats.... It is a matter of the greatest national interest....”. In fact, by March 1945, Franco-American relations were so poor that the invasion of Germany was beginning to seem, to the French at least, as a competition between the French and American armies rather than as a coordinated assault. Independent use of France’s own forces seemed to de Gaulle to be the only way to guarantee to France the rights he was seeking.

On April 12, 1945, the French army occupied Rastatt and Baden-Baden, an undamaged spa town which the French wanted as capital of their zone of occupation, and began the great maneuver which ended in the capture of the whole of the German 18th S.S. Army Corps. On the same day, in Warm Springs, Georgia, a massive cerebral hemorrhage caused the death of the American President. April 14 was observed as a day of national mourning throughout France. But there was little change in de Gaulle’s policy in Germany. On April 21, the French army captured the major industrial city of Stuttgart, which had been assigned to the U.S. Seventh Army. They refused to give it up when the Americans arrived on April 26, and kept it until the zonal boundaries were finally settled on June 22.

The wartime relations between the French and the Americans ended on a last irony. On May 13, General Devers, who was commanding the American Seventh Army, invited himself to attend a big celebration by the French army in Stuttgart. Perhaps fittingly, in view of FDR’s often repeated joke, it was a Joan of Arc festival.

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